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Vegetables and Herbs as Ornamentals

This NebGuide discusses the use of vegetables as ornamental plants.

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Many vegetables have ornamental, as well as food value. In fact, when tomatoes were first introduced to Europe, they were believed to be poisonous and were used only as ornamentals. Using vegetables as ornamentals is not just for those without space for a traditional vegetable garden. Incorporating vegetables into the landscape and using them as decorative container plants for porches and patios can make vegetable gardening more fun.

Most vegetables prefer several hours of direct sunlight each day. If space is not available for a traditional vegetable garden, vegetables can be incorporated into other sunny areas, including flower beds. Imagination is the only limit to what food crops can be grown as ornamentals. Some possibilities are described below, including some selected cultivars which perform satisfactorily in Nebraska.

Most traditional vegetable gardens are planted in the backyard, far from the kitchen. When vegetables and herbs are planted closer to the house, they are more easily available for immediate use. Leaf lettuce, radishes, and low-growing herbs can be planted as edging to flower beds. Inter-plant annual flowers with lettuce and radishes - as the vegetables are harvested, the flowers will fill in the bare spots.

Peppers

Most hot peppers have colorful fruit which can brighten up a border. Not only can these peppers



add spice to food, they also make great decorations inside and out. Some peppers are sold specifically as ornamental plants. The fruits of these plants are edible if they haven't been treated with pesticides designed for ornamental plants; ask before purchasing a "dual purpose" plant. "Ornamental" peppers are usually extremely hot and may be slightly bitter. Look for cultivars which produce fruit on the top of the plant. The brightly colored peppers will stand out against the dark green foliage. There are several new sweet peppers of various colors including purple, white, brown, orange, yellow, and blue. Ask for plants at the local garden store or order seed from mail-order seed sources. Remember, peppers need full sun for maximum production and best color development.

Tomatoes



Determinate*, or bush, tomato plants are attractive when grown in large containers. They can also provide a background for shorticultureer vegetables and flowers. Grow tomatoes in cages to keep the fruit off the ground to reduce spoilage. Caging also allows the fruit to be seen, providing red or orange flashes through the leaf canopy. Cherry tomato plants are also ornamental when covered with bunches of bright, red fruit. Use taller, stronger cages to hold indeterminate*, or vining, cherry tomato plants.

Vine Crops

Squash, gourds, pumpkins, and cucumbers have lush foliage and showy blossoms, as well as interestingly shaped fruit. Plants with bush-type growth make nice specimen plants at the corner of a patio, yard, or building. Bush-type plants require less area than vining types, making them ideal when space is limited. Vining plants can be tied to or trained to climb a trellis or fence to provide shade or screen out an unsightly view. Use winter squash, pumpkins, and gourds to make colorful fall decorations. Most winter squash and pumpkins can be stored and cooked throughout the winter.

These plants have large, quick-germinating seed, making them easy for children and beginning gardeners to grow. In Nebraska, virus diseases, squash vine borers, cucumber beetles, and squash bugs can be a problem. Plants should be inspected regularly to determine if insect control is necessary. Those infected with viruses or bacterial wilt should be pulled up and disposed of in the trash, not in the compost pile.

Ornamental Corn

While corn plants are not usually thought of as ornamental, the ears of Indian and strawberry popcorn make colorful decorations. Some ornamental corn has red stalks can be used in the fall for decorative yard displays. There are many types of ornamental corn available, including both large and miniature ears. Individual cultivars of ornamental corn should be isolated from one another and from sweet corn to prevent cross pollination.

Swiss Chard



With its bright crimson stalks supporting crinkled red-veined, dark green leaves, rhubarb chard makes an attractive foliage plant. Chard tolerates cold weather and frost as well as hot days in the summer. It is an excellent pot herb when steamed and buttered like spinach or stir-fried in Asian dishes. If plants become old and tattered-looking in mid-summer, simply cut off all of the leaves a few inches above the soil. The plants will quickly send up bright, glossy leaves which look nice and have a more delicate flavor than the older leaves.

Leaf Lettuce

Other vegetables-as-ornamental choices include the many types of leaf lettuces available. Both



red- and green-leaved cultivars make good borders in front of taller flowers or herbs. Look for cultivars with curly leaves to add texture to the border. As days grow longer and warmer, lettuce will become bitter and bolt (go to seed). By inter-planting with annual flowers, you can remove lettuce which is past its prime without leaving open spaces in the garden.

Kale



Flowering kale comes in several color combinations and textures. Green outer leaves surround either white or reddish-purple crinkled inner leaves, so the entire vegetative plant appears as a large flower. Kale is excellent for planting in mid- to late summer since it is hardy and holds its color late into autumn. In fact, the colors intensify as fall temperatures drop. Therefore it usually looks better in the fall than when planted in the spring. Both ornamental and regular kale can be eaten fresh, used as garnish, or cooked like chard or spinach.

Asparagus

Asparagus ferns provide a soft, airy background to set off flowering plants. Because the plants are tall, plant asparagus where it won't shade sun-loving plants during the day. Harvest the spears in the spring, but allow the ferns to grow throughout the summer. Leave asparagus ferns in the garden over the winter to catch snow and leaves which mulch the crowns and other plants growing nearby. Tops should be cut off at ground level in very early spring, prior to the emergence of new spears.

Beans

Scarlet runner beans are often located with flower seed in garden stores and seed catalogs, but the pods are edible. They should be grown on a trellis and can provide shade for a patio or porch. Since they are annuals, the vines can be removed after frost to let the winter sun shine through.

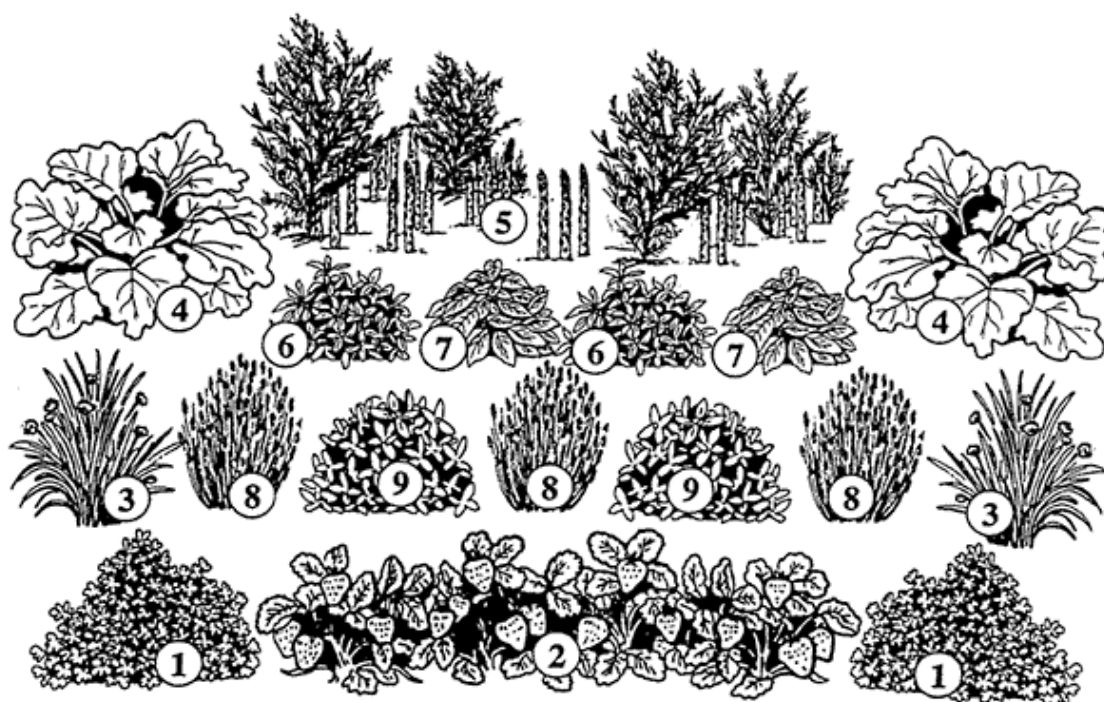
There are also bush beans with ornamental characteristics. 'Royal Burgundy' and 'Royalty Purple Pod' bear dark purple pods which also turn green when cooked. There are hundreds of old and new cultivars of dry beans with a multitude of colors and color patterns. While the plants are not necessarily ornamental, they can be stored in jars to add color to the kitchen.

Okra

Though not overly popular in the Midwest, okra does have ornamental, as well as culinary, value. The plants have 2 to 3 inch yellow flowers, similar to hibiscus, to which they are related. Cultivars come tall or shorticulture with red or green pods. Even those who do not like eating okra may find the mature dried pods beautiful in dried flower arrangements.

Eggplant

Eggplant comes in many shapes and colors. There are long skinny Japanese-types; white miniature cultivars which look like hens' eggs; orange African types that look like tiny pumpkins on a stick; lavender Italian cultivars, and the traditional plump, dark purple American cultivars. Look in specialty seed catalogs to find unusual, yet edible, additions for your garden.



Perennial Border

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Thyme, variegated lemon | 6. Pineapple Sage |
| 2. Strawberries | 7. Basil |
| 3. Chives | 8. Munstead Lavender |
| 4. Rhubarb | 9. Sweet Marjoram |
| 5. Asparagus | |

Herbs

Many culinary herbs can also be grown for their ornamental characters. Placing a small plot of herbs near the kitchen makes it handy for seasoning food.

Chives are a perennial plant with pretty lavender flowers. Harvest the leaves by snipping with sharp scissors and the plants will grow back thicker. The flowers can be used to garnish culinary creations.

There are many varieties of basil from which to choose. 'Green Bouquet' and 'Spicy Globe' are two dwarf sweet basil cultivars which can be used to make a formal edging around flower and herb beds. Individual plants also look nice in pots or interspersed in the flower garden. Most other basil varieties are not as decorative as the two mentioned above, but they can be included in the flower garden to provide texture and aroma. Cinnamon, holy, lemon and regular sweet basil are all easy to grow from seed.

Creeping thyme is another low-growing plant for edging or rock gardens. It can be planted between the paving stones in a path or since it tolerates mowing it can be included in a scented "herb lawn". There are variegated forms to provide different color combinations in the garden.

Rosemary is not hardy in Nebraska. During the summer, grow it outside in a container so it can be moved inside during the winter. There are several cultivars with a number of different growing habits and in a variety of colors. Children may enjoy training rosemary on wire topiary forms which are available in many shapes and sizes.

There are many other herbs which can be included in your garden. Visit a garden store to look for plants which you can use in cooking or simply enjoy for their texture and aroma.

Following are a few of the many vegetable cultivars with ornamental value which have performed satisfactorily in Nebraska.

Summer Squash	Summer Sunburst F ₁	Bright yellow scallop fruit
	Scallop Peter Pan	Hybrid green scallop fruit
	Blondie Zucchini F ₁	Ivory-colored zucchini
	Goldrush Zucchini F ₁	Bright gold zucchini
	Seneca Hybrid Zucchini	Dark green zucchini
	Multipik F ₁	Fruit are yellow from the time they are first formed.
Winter Squash	Cream of the Crop F ₁	Ivory colored acorn squash
	Turks Turban	Multi-colored edible fruits
	Orangetti F ₁ Spaghetti	Golden orange spaghetti squash
Pumpkin	Spirit F ₁	Semi-bush jack'o'lantern
	Bushkin F ₁	Shorticulture-vine plants, thick flesh
	Triple Treat F ₁	Jack-o'-lanterns with naked seeds
	Lumina	White pumpkins for painting or carving.
Tomato	Husky Red F ₁	Dwarf, indeterminate* plants
	Husky Cherry Red F ₁	Dwarf, indeterminate plants
	Husky Gold F ₁	Dwarf, indeterminate plants
	SuperSweet 100 F ₁	Clusters of very sweet fruits
Eggplant	Rosa Bianca	Violet and white fruit
	Little Fingers	Long, skinny dark purple fruit
	Ghostbuster F ₁	White fruit
	Easteregg	Small, white egg-shaped fruit
Okra	Jade	Productive, early
	Annie Oakley F ₁	Compact plants, slender pods
	Burgundy F ₁	Burgundy pods
Hot Pepper	Copacabana F ₁	Very prolific and colorful
	Superchile F ₁	Good for drying and decoration
	Habanero or Scotch Bonnet	Hottest pepper available, has a unique fruity flavor.
	Serrano	Hairy foliage, small fruits good green or dried red.

Ornamental Corn	Seneca Red Stalker	Purple stalked plants
	Strawberry Popcorn	Small ears of red popcorn
	Baby Blue (mini)	Miniature ears, robin's egg blue
	Indian Fingers (mini)	Miniature ears, multicolored

For mail-order sources see NebFact 92-80 *General and Specialty Mail-Order Seed Sources*.

*Determinate bush tomato plants grow shortculturer, with concentrated fruit set. They need smaller cages or stakes or can be grown without support. Indeterminate or vine-type tomato plants can be grown on the ground, but they usually yield larger, more perfect fruit over a longer period if supported in a cage or are staked and pruned. Dwarf indeterminate plants are naturally dwarf in size, but because they are indeterminate, they set fruit throughout the growing season like a regular indeterminate plant.

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